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ISLAND COMMENTARY

Rail route, agenda scrutinized

By Kioni Dudley, Ph.D.

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If you think the reason for building the rail is to solve the traffic problems on the West side, think again.

The train starts in what is now wide open land planned for a future huge shopping center and hotel. There will be 900 stalls for rail commuters.

The second stop is also in open fields where University of Hawaii-West Oahu will rise. Just blocks from the freeway, it has the potential to draw thousands of commuters, but with just 1,000 park-and-ride stalls, its effect will go unnoticed by the other 142,000 townbound cars on the freeway during rush hour.

The third stop is in the middle of the world's highest-producing 1,555 acres of farmland, which must be saved for our future survival. This station has been planned as the keystone for the huge "transit-oriented" development, Ho'opili.

The fourth stop finally reaches civilization. It is just a block inside of Waipahu from Fort Weaver Road, and is situated perfectly to take traffic from Village Park and Royal Kunia, and to receive drivers coming up Fort Weaver Road from Ewa and Ewa Beach, saving them another hour's travel to the city. But this stop does not have even one stall for them to park in. And they will all have to just pass it by.

Let's get it straight, then. This rail is not being built to solve current traffic problems. It actually is not even for us. It is being built to benefit developers.

The traffic problems it will solve are future problems, yet to be caused by people yet to move into homes yet to be built.

We voted for rail. We are paying for it every time we make a purchase. And we have been misled.

There are other secrets. The rail, as planned, will destroy Waipahu. For decades Waipahu missed out on the money and care spent on other parts of Oahu. A few years back, Sen. Cal Kawa-moto and others got money to beautify it. The transformation has been amazing.

When the Ho'opili station was put into the rail plan, the most direct open path from that station to the city was through the main street of Waipahu, Pearl City and Aiea. Now, even before the many new trees and the yellow hibiscus lining the main street reach full growth, all of the beauty will be torn out.

A massive, overhead cement span will have stations the size of football fields covering the entire road at each end of town.

The same will happen to Pearl City and Aiea. All three towns, now choked with afternoon traffic, will experience debilitating traffic and business bankruptcies along their primary road, due to construction.

But none of this has to happen. Use of the old Oahu Railway and Land (OR&L) right-of-way can solve everything. If the rail follows the OR&L route, it can run at surface level at least to the stadium, still using the "steel wheels on steel rails" that we voted for, but using light rail.

The right-of-way runs along the water, providing a beautiful ride; can accommodate a bikeway alongside; encounters only a few cross roads; is already cleared of 'iwi; is government-owned; and could be built for about one-fourth the money in one-fourth the time.

Headed in the other direction, the right-of-way extends through Kapolei to Ko Olina, and up the coast to Waianae, and can become the much-needed second way in and out.

If the rail began at UH-West Oahu, but instead headed makai to the old OR&L line, it could serve H-1 and Kapolei. The OR&L line then runs just below Ewa. A park-and-ride at Fort Weaver Road would give rail service to Ewa and Ewa Beach. Next stop, Depot Road in Waipahu, then up behind Leeward Community College, through Pearl City, to the stadium and Pearl Harbor.

Why was the OR&L route never seriously considered? Because it didn't run through Ho'opili. But Ho'opili has recently had a perhaps lethal setback at the Land Use Commission. And polls show 87 percent of the people want that land kept in agriculture.

Now is the time for change. Write Gov. Linda Lingle at governor.lingle@hawaii.gov and urge her to withhold her signature until these problems are solved.

We need the rail. But it must be done right.

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